

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“God’s Life-Giving Grace”

By Eric Howell
Galatians 1:11-24
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Brothers and sisters in Christ, the gospel of Jesus Christ is sufficient and capable to effect immediate, radical transformation in an individual. Surely no one knows this better than that young man whose own slow-moving burial procession met the Jesus’ Healing Parade. Jesus takes pity on his widowed mother and touches the casket. The young man sits up and starts talking. Don’t you wonder what the guy’s first words were when he sat up from the casket that Jesus touched . . .

“Guess it was the green wire.”

“Mom, you were right. People will never fly.”

“It was. It was soap poisoning.” (Christmas Story anyone?)

The Gospel can radically and immediately change lives and does do it. That doesn’t mean that immediate and radical are the only ways to receive the gospel. The road to Damascus is not the only place Christians are made. Not all of us have had a bag of hammers to the head kind of spiritual experience. It’s also not to say that an immediate, radical transformation is the best way to be a Christian and all other ways are lacking somehow. Christians are made in all sorts of ways—some by immediate, radical transformation; others by the slow, long process of spiritual formation and spiritual journey. Nietche’s phrase: a “long obedience in the same direction” was borrowed by Eugene Peterson to describe Christian spirituality.

This is the way we usually think about the Christian life here. We think about it as children going to VBS, then youth group, then college ministry, then young adults, then adulthood and in the process, growing, not always linearly, not always consistently, but on this spiritual journey to know and love Jesus. But for people who have generally known God and known Jesus their whole lives, it’s important not to be too tamed in the faith. It’s important to remember that the untamed power of the gospel of Christ is capable of changing everything at any moment.

In this week’s Psalm, number 30, the psalmist expresses gratitude for the rescue and relief that was given by God. The words are the prayer of all Christians who have experienced salvation and know what it means to be rescued.

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up and have not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, You have brought up my nephesh from Sheol; You restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit. The nephesh is the soul; the life-force; that which animates you and makes you alive; it’s your being. Sheol is the Old Testament word for the place of the dead. You have brought up my soul from Sheol. Notice that the psalmist already feels like he was in the place of the dead. Notice that he

was not just in danger of going there, or was peering over the brink of death and God pulled him back in the nick of time. He was already gone.

When I was a kid at grandma's house one year, I was very excited. She got cable. No one had ever had cable before. And they were showing this movie, "Firefox," in which Clint Eastwood is an American who has infiltrated a Soviet airbase to steal the prototype for a new generation MIG and fly it home. For those of you born too late, it's "Hunt for Red October" with airplanes. For those of you born too late for that, it's . . . I don't know. I stopped going to movies after we had kids. But I was like 10 years old and it was on cable at 5:00 a.m. the day we were leaving to drive back home. I set my alarm and got out of bed and turned the cable TV on quietly to watch Clint Eastwood steal the MIG and fly it out of Russian airspace. And there's the scene that made me bring it all up this morning. He had to land this plane on a glacier to refuel. The plane slams down and skids and he's rattling toward the edge of the glacier. And the plane comes right to the edge and just as the front wheel is about to go over the edge, plunging Clint and his life and everything he has worked for into the abyss, the plane comes to a rest and he is safe.

And what an image of the gospel's power that is. It is a power that rescues us just before we go off the edge. It saves us just before our lives are lost, before our souls are lost. We can continue on our journey, our spiritual journey, having learned an important lesson, but saved from the worst sorts of catastrophes.

Maybe that's a good metaphor for Paul's life-story that we read in Galatians this morning. Paul was the decorated fighter pilot of his time, totally successful in everything he tried. It was just that he came to a moment when he realized that everything he was trying was wrong. Paul's conversion wasn't an empowerment of someone who was a failure. It was the redemption of someone who was wildly successful. He was really, really good at hunting down and destroying Christians; until he became one as he was travelling on his way to Damascus. And then he was really, really passionate about making Christians, and making churches, and telling the story of Jesus and how an encounter with God changed everything about him and his outlook on life. In another place in the New Testament, he will describe all the accomplishments of his past life and call them rubbish, compared to knowing Christ.

Paul's dramatic conversion is the prototype for the immediate, total, radical transformation of a person by an encounter with Christ. The Damascus Road experience has become emblematic of a sinner's salvation. God saved someone who was on the wrong track, going the wrong way. And now in Galatians, the testimony about him is this: He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

Lots of people today have this kind of story in their own lives of transformation. I think of the phone call I got in the middle of the night that a friend of mine had been in a terrible car accident and broken his neck. We had fished and lifted weights together. I was a more patient fisherman, but I had to take a lot of his weights off the rack before I could lift the bar. Because of his strength and God's

grace, he survived the accident, but wore a white neck brace for months. The first time I saw him without it was when he was slowing, gingerly descending the steps into the pool of water in which I would baptize him on his surrender to Jesus Christ for his salvation.

We might think of Augustine's conversion story as he recounts that torment by his own thoughts, and reflections on what truth is and about the gospel story; he withdrew to a garden and suddenly heard a child's voice chanting a rhyme, "pick up and read, pick up and read." He thought at first it was just a child's game, but he had never heard that game before. He remembered what he had read about the conversion of the Desert Monk, Anthony, which was effected by the hearing of a sermon on a passage of scripture. Young, troubled Augustine picked up a Bible and did something we educated preachers never encourage you to do instead of intentional, regular scriptural study and reflection. He played Bible roulette. He just opened it up and read the first words, ***Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh (Rom 13:13).***

He understood in that moment that those words were addressed personally to him, coming from God. In that moment he finally felt the darkness clear and found himself free to give himself entirely to Christ. He described it: "You're converting me to Yourself."

The gospel has this power to radically and dramatically change lives. And yet most of the Christians I know, even the devout Christians for whom their faith is the most important and determinative aspect of their lives, did not become Christians this way. For most Christians I know, it was and is a long process. We might be able to name a day and time when we prayed a prayer asking Jesus into our heart, or when we were baptized, or when we were especially moved in our spirits to repent and follow Christ, but all of that was still part of a longer story that moved us along.

Not all Christians are made in a dramatic moment. And that's why we want to be a bit careful not to give the impression that you have to have a dramatic, emotional response to Christ. It's not about emotion. It's about surrender. Sometimes it's about a long obedience in the same direction. One of you remembered recently when you were a youth and your pastor lamented, "I'm tired of hearing these great stories of how a person's life was terrible; how they were on drugs and sleeping around, and causing all kinds of trouble, and then how God rescued them from all of that and set them on a new path. What I want to hear are more stories about a young person who learned about, began to explore their faith as a student in church, and then went to college and stayed faithful, asked good and better questions, but got involved in a church and avoided making the terrible life-mistakes that are not only detrimental to their health, but also displeasing to God. And then they went on into adulthood as people who followed Jesus and tried to be faithful to Him. I want to hear more boring stories."

Thank God that the church is full of stories of people who have been rescued from the brink, and full of so-called boring stories too. But I dare say that the power

of the gospel is not exhausted in the stories of the person whose life is characterized by a long obedience, nor is it exhausted in the person rescued on the road to Damascus.

Think of the scene in the movie again of St. Clint hurling toward the edge of destruction, holding on for life, seemingly unable to stop the trajectory he was on. Having done everything else, will our hero be undone by his own self, by forces beyond his control, by his own good intentions, to have conquered so much only to fail here at the last moment? He doesn't. Good ol' Clint. He saves the day and his own skin. In the movie, as you would expect, he comes to a stop just short of going over the edge.

In real life, people do go over the edge into the abyss. When Clint was landing the plane one of the people on the glacier said, "He's going awfully fast." And another one said, "He must know what he's doing." In real life, people often don't know what they are doing. Their lives are just out of control. In real life people bust through the guard rails, people make terrible decisions that have implications, people do destructive things to their bodies, their relationships, and their nephesh.

And what happens in people is that then, if they haven't before, they feel utterly and totally worthless—not just unredeemable, but not worthy of redemption. Not just incapable of saving themselves, but not worth the effort of being saved. Life then becomes a long, string of self-destructive, self-sabotaging decisions, each of which affirms the conclusions drawn by those that preceded it.

Here is where we must believe: the gospel is sufficient to sustain a long journey; the gospel is sufficient to rescue someone from the brink; and, the gospel is sufficient to rescue anyone, or any part of any of us that has already fallen into the dark abyss.

If the Bible didn't tell the story of King David, who could have believed that a holy man could sink so low? Martin Luther points out that David broke nearly all of the 10 commandments. And then he got called on it. And then he suffered the consequences --- sackcloth, ashes, and a son who died. But even David, who perhaps penned this Psalm, was later called a man after God's own heart. He was a changed man.

The gospel faith is resurrection faith. It is not just a faith for good times or for avoiding bad times. It is a faith for the worst of times and the worst of situations. It is a faith for when we need not to just be disciplined, not just corrected, but when we need to be saved. The gospel is sufficient for each of us in the place in our lives where we are most in darkness, most in despair, most lost, most dead. God's grace is sufficient for you. In our weakness, God is strong. In our deaths, God is Life.

Experiencing God's life-giving grace, we join the psalmist and Paul, and the young man and his mother, and Augustine, and everyone who has met the Jesus soul-healing parade: "O Lord my God, I cried to You for help, and You have healed me. O Lord, You have brought up my soul from the dead; You restored me to life from among those who go to the pit. . . You have turned my mourning into dancing;

You have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness. . . O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever!"